SU forum addresses La. cancer

By PETER SHINKLE, Advocate staff writer

Blacks in New Orleans have the highest published rate of lung cancer in the world, and the nation's health system must change to address the increased rate of cancer among blacks, speakers told a conference Tuesday.

Lung cancer strikes about 145 of every 100,000 black males in the New Orleans area, a pace that is "the highest published rate in the world," said Dr. Terry Fontham, an author of the report that first announced the finding.

Fontham was one of four cancer researchers who told a conference at Southern University that cancer strikes blacks at a higher rate than whites, and then offered ways to reduce cancer among blacks and the rest of the population.

In 1991, Fontham and other researchers working with Louisiana Tumor Registry data published a survey of 35 Southern Louisiana parishes showing that most forms of cancer strike Louisianians at about the same rate as they strike people in the rest of the country.

For years, it had been known that people in South Louisiana die of cancer at a higher rate than people in the rest of the country. The 1991 study demonstrated that cancer was not being diagnosed and treated quickly enough, Fontham said.

"We need to reach the people that we're not reaching," she said.

One vital need is for more people to have continuous care from the same doctor, she said. Many poor people now turn to hospital emergency rooms for care, seeing different doctors each visit, Fontham said.

Nationwide, blacks experience an increased rate of cancer. For every 100,000 citizens in each group, cancer strikes 524 black males, 424 white males, 332 white females, and 322 black females, according to the 1991 study.

Blacks experienced nearly 2.5 years of slavery, followed by 100 years of legalized segregation until the 1960s, and that legacy of racism plays a role in poverty, which contributes to the high rates of cancer among blacks today, said Dr. Harold Freeman, director of surgery at Harlem Hospital Complex in New York.

"Poor American people do not have access to health care. They meet barriers when they try to negotiate the system," he said.

For instance, he said, many cannot get care because they are among the estimated 37 million Americans who have no health insurance.

Studies have shown that the poor and those who have little education are at higher risk of dying of cancer than those who are well-to-do and are educated, he said.
Cancer actually kills poor whites' at a slightly higher rate than poor blacks, he said. But blacks, who make up 12 percent of the nation's population, comprise 33 percent of the nation's poor and, therefore, as a group experience an unusually high cancer level.

"We cannot solve the health care problem for black America without solving the health care problem of all Americans," he said.

The government should devote increased resources to medical care in areas where cancer mortality is highest, he said.

Freeman attacked the tobacco industry for what he said is a strategy of targeting blacks, women and children with advertisements.

The tobacco industry spends $2.5 billion annually on advertising, often portraying smoking as "glamorous, sexy, healthful," Fontham said.

At the same time, blacks and consumers must take responsibility for stopping smoking and changing their diets, Freeman said. High-fat diets increase a person's risk of cancer. He pointed to "soul food," traditional African-American dishes.

"I don't want to speak against the culture, but I do want to speak against that part of it that causes disease and death," he said.

For instance, fatty foods like pigs' feet are unhealthy, but collard greens and other staples of "soul food" are good for you, he said.

Doctors and other health care providers who treat cancer in blacks and other ethnic minorities must consider an array of cultural differences, said Dr. Sarah Moody Thomas, a community education specialist at the LSU Medical Center in New Orleans.

"Many African-Americans believe it is fatal—why bother?" she said.

In addition, some blacks may wait longer to seek treatment, or may turn to folk medicine, such as that offered by spiritualists or practitioners of voodoo.

Thomas pointed to a paradox of health care: "In order to be treated fairly and equally, individuals must be treated differently."